

Striking a Deal: When Ethics and Corporate Deals Collide

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Librarians and information specialists strive to provide patrons with age-appropriate access to materials that fulfill their intellectual curiosity and research needs in a non-judgmental environment that maintains their anonymity and self-respect. However, in a school environment, librarians are subject to oversight and decisions made by administrators, including school principals. In order to meet the budgetary needs of the school's media center, school principals may seek creative ways to acquire much needed library resources. The decisions made by these school leaders, however, may conflict with the values and ethics of librarians. In one case study discussed by librarians Elizabeth Buchanan and Kathrine Henderson (2009), Time-Harner, a media company, offered a school media center \$500,000 if the school agreed to rename its media center after the company (106). As part of the deal, the media center received new computers and high-speed internet access, with the requirement that the school's district offices subscribe to Time Harner's digital phone and business packages at a discounted rate. Similar pricing was extended to parents interested in subscribing to the services as well. Faced with the benefit of gaining an economic windfall for the school and much needed resources, the principal agreed to the deal as a "win-win" situation. Parents and librarians liked the new resources, but worried about the impact of corporate influence on the school's media center (106).

Librarians are professionally-bound to provide patrons with access to information. This deal made by the school's principal increases student access to informational sources, which are vital for a democracy. However, librarians must also consider social responsibility and intellectual freedom as they formulate their response to concerned parents (American Library Association, 2004). One of the first questions that must be considered is whether there was a bidding process for this contract? If this is a public school's media center (which is not made

clear), there should be a competitive bidding process for naming rights to the media center and a public forum to discuss the issue before any final decision is made. Additionally, there should be an end date to the naming rights deal in the same manner as a public sports venue. Another important consideration in how librarians should respond to concerned parents depends on whether librarians are required by the school's principal to stress services offered by the corporate sponsor? If so that could interfere with intellectual freedom. If, however, the \$500,000 donation to the media center can be used to purchase materials that offer contrasting views and services, it could protect and advance the cause of intellectual freedom. If the contract stipulated (which is not known) that librarians must utilize the money in a particular way, that would be an unacceptable breach of intellectual freedom.

Librarians should encourage parents to attend meetings of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), where they can voice their concerns further. If the PTA agrees that there are legal or intellectual implications from the deal, teachers could discuss the issue with their union, which in turn could discuss the matter on an equal footing with the principal and the school district. This would limit any retribution from the principal towards the librarian or any specific teacher for speaking out on the issue. Librarians may also consult with the American Library Association, which can make its position in support of intellectual freedom known to the teacher's union and the school. If a violation of intellectual freedom is discovered or other legal issues are raised, the American Library Association, in conjunction with the teacher's union, could form a powerful coalition to challenge the legality of the deal made by the school's principal.

References

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Buchanan, E.A. and Henderson, K.A. (2009). *Case studies in library and information science ethics*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.